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Humor's Role in Preparing Future Leaders

Humor in the workplace has recently become an important topic in management publications such as *Harvard Business Review, Wall Street Journal, Training Magazine*, and *Business Week*. In addition to books and articles written on humor, humor seminars and workshops are being offered around the country.

While the study of humor is *not* new, investigating its use in the business world *is*. Many benefits of humor have been suggested by writers, from reducing stress to enhancing communication. One of the most widely promoted benefits is that humor appears to fulfill an individual's psychological desire to be part of a group. Seemingly, people have a natural desire to be part of a team, whether it is professional or social.

Beyond good pay and strong benefits, a company should give people a sense that they are part of a team. Having fun on the job is one way to achieve a teamwork attitude. Teams that laugh together can work together. (1) The Superiority Theory of humor helps explain how individuals with a sense of humor are able to achieve cohesiveness. Members of a group see humor as being part of the social or cultural identity of the group.

Among the companies that make humor an integral part of their organization is Odetics, a California company that makes robots and spaceborne tape recorders. Reflecting their commitment to the development of humor, Odetics has had a Fun Committee since 1982. Employee activities, such as a hula hoop contest, bubble-gum-blowing competitions, and telephone-booth stuffing, have been sponsored by the Fun Committee. Odetics believes that such activities foster a feeling of being a part of a team.

Humor also promotes novelty, divergent thinking, creative problem solving, and risk taking. (2) The Incongruity Theory of humor helps explain how an individual is able to find an unexpected or novel way to approach a problem using a sense of humor. Something incongruous does not fit a person's conceptual patterns and ordinary ways of looking at things. In a humorous frame of mind, people are distanced from the practical and ordinary and are able to benefit creatively from the incongruity.

When people are laughing, their brains seem to operate more efficiently and symmetrically. Unfortunately, most people do not use both sides of the brain equally. Usually, people tend to favor either the logical side or the creative side. Humor seems to facilitate a more balanced cerebral activity that leads to creative thinking. This creative thinking produces different solutions to problems than the individual or team might otherwise generate.

Management consulting firm Robert Half International reported that in a study of personnel directors at 100 of the nation's largest corporations, 84 percent report that people with a sense of humor are more creative, less rigid, and more willing to try new ideas and methods. The findings of this research suggest that laughter results in several physiological changes in the body that may be the reason for increased creativity and flexibility.

Hodge-Cronin & Associates, a management consulting firm in Rosemont, Illinois, regularly conducts surveys on humor in the workplace. They survey approximately 600 top executives from various-sized corporations. Here is a sample of the findings from their 1994 study, *Humor in the Workplace*:

- 100 percent of the executives responding stated that humor had a positive impact in a business situation.
- 95 percent of the executives stated that all things being equal, they would more likely hire a candidate with a sense of humor.
- 80 percent of the executives stated that humor can have a positive effect when dealing with foreign executives provided you understand the culture and use humor appropriately.
- 43 percent believed that the use of humor is decreasing. While the use of humor is declining, the demand for it is increasing.

Based on the findings of Robert Half and Hodge-Cronin, a sense of humor appears to be a sought-after skill in the business world. Some corporations around the globe looking for ways to improve their productivity are so desperate to learn how to encourage humor in the workplace that they are turning to "humor consultants" for help. Interestingly, while a majority of corporate executives contacted report that a sense of humor is essential for success in the business world, business

schools largely ignore the use of humor in the curriculum.

How can teachers use humor as an instructional tool? Teachers do not have to be able to "tell a joke" to use humor successfully. However, they should pay close attention to possible humor in situations. One of the easiest ways to achieve a reputation for having a great sense of humor is to laugh at other people's anecdotes. After all, if someone tells a great joke in the forest and no one else is around to hear it, is it really funny?

Following are some suggestions for developing and promoting the use of humor in the classroom.

1. Keep a book of jokes or cartoons handy, and read something funny 10 minutes before teaching a class. It makes good sense to keep a first aid kit for medical emergencies, so why not keep a "mirth kit" to provide first aid for mental health. A good laugh enhances a teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students.
2. Look for amusing anecdotes that can be used to illustrate difficult concepts. Humor is everywhere–in the newspapers, on the television, and in the classroom. Attempt to find the absurd in everyday life. Save cartoons, clippings, quotes, and humorous anecdotes. When a situation arises, use humorous stories, personal or otherwise, to help students retain information.
3. Utilize analogies that transform abstract ideas into more familiar examples. Then ask students to think of other analogies that could be used. See how many different analogies students can derive to illustrate the same concept.
4. Use colorful expressions and homemade "props" to communicate important ideas. Exaggerate a point to let students know it is important. Vary voice intonations and body language to bring a point to life.
5. Laugh **at** yourself. The ability to laugh at oneself is seen as an indication of positive self-esteem. Also, students' anxiety may be reduced by sending the welcome message that the teacher is human and admittedly fallible. The teacher's willingness to be spontaneous and imperfect seems to assure students of a more dynamic and forgiving learning environment than they usually experience.
6. Laugh **with** your students. Such laughter helps to promote a bond between teacher and students. However, a teacher must always be sensitive to every student and not embarrass anyone needlessly by laughing **at** a student.

While humor does not replace the need for solid content, effective presentation, and logical subject flow, displaying a sense of humor in the classroom is highly recommended. Humor is not the ultimate goal; it is a tool to help make a point. Humor appears to have a role in teaching, and it should be considered as a classroom tool by teachers. Studies have shown that classroom humor increases student attentiveness, decreases class monotony, and leads to superior retention of material.

Humor can provide valuable feedback for an instructor. Students do not laugh unless they are paying attention. Once instructors use humor, students often feel more comfortable in displaying a sense of humor themselves. Even if a teacher does not get giant laughs, this short break from the routine can revitalize students so they may be more attentive during the rest of the lesson.

Students need to realize that sense of humor is a skill that they can and should develop. Humor is a perspective, a way of looking at and coping with life. Encourage students to practice laughing as they would any other skill. In addition to promoting a teamwork attitude, they may find that humor increases their mental flexibility.

Countries and companies around the world are seeking new ways to be productive and remain competitive. It would be presumptuous to suggest that humor alone could help a firm move into a top position in its industry. However, humor can go a long way toward promoting creative thinking and teamwork in the firm. Encourage a sense of humor in your students by capitalizing on the many opportunities for humor in the classroom. Humor may be one of the most important skills to develop in order for today's students to become the leaders of tomorrow.

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